

Workforce housing debate moves off the back burner

■ Discussions on growth, master plans puts housing crisis in the spotlight

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When County Councilman Steven A. Silverman proposed including affordable housing in new developments around Metro stations last year, the plan was sidelined while fair housing, prescription drug reimportation and even pandemic flu took the spotlight.

Lately, Silverman's proposal — although not always specifically mentioned — is resurfacing in council discussions on issues ranging from health care to schools. As the county's population grows, so does the need for affordable housing.

"What's clear is that we've got a workforce/middle class housing crisis in the county," said Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring and a county executive candidate. "This is only a piece to create middle class housing in Montgomery County. There is no program that will create thousands of middle class units in the county, but that doesn't mean that that we don't try."

Under Silverman's proposal, developers would be required to make 10 percent of units in new developments around Metro stations available for workforce housing, intended for teachers, police, firefighters and nurses who cannot afford to buy or rent in the county. The plan is seen as a way of gradually increasing the stock of affordable housing units, rather than building

or buying them, as is done now.

The plan does not include density bonuses for developers to include the lower-priced units.

Workforce housing is designed for two working adults who earn between 80 percent and 120 percent of the region's median annual income — or between \$50,000 and \$100,000 a year. In Montgomery County, median annual income for a family of four is \$89,000; or \$71,000 for a two-person household. Families could afford units priced between \$180,000 and \$350,000.

The housing would augment units already built under county's Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit program, whose income requirements are lower than in Silverman's proposal. Park and Planning officials have not yet determined how many units could be produced under his plan.

Based on income levels and low-cost housing program requirements, many residents do not qualify for the cheaper MPDU rents.

"Why are we playing games that we even have affordable housing at all right now?" Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park asked last week.

Another problem is getting developers on board, especially when a strong housing market has supported higher rents. The council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee has been told that some form of incentive is necessary to make Silverman's proposal work for developers. Incentives could include offering tax breaks or market-rate density bonuses to developers or decreasing the income limits.